

*The Guardian*

# South Korea to shut a quarter of its coal-fired plants over winter to cut pollution

Plants will close during coldest months in a bid to reduce high levels of fine dust particles

[Justin McCurry](#) and agencies

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Large areas of South Korea were blanketed in fine dust in Spring, prompting calls for action on air pollution. Up to a quarter of country's coal-fired plants will temporarily shut down over winter. Photograph: Lee Jae Won/Reuters

[South Korea](#) will temporarily shut down up to a quarter of its coal-fired power plants next month in an attempt to combat dangerously high levels of fine dust pollution.

The country's energy ministry said 14 plants would be idled between December and February, and as many as 27 in March, but added that the closures would not affect energy supplies during the coldest months of the year.

Other plants will be maintain their power output at 80% of capacity, depending on demand, the Yonhap news agency said.

South Korea's 60 coal-fired power plants generated 40% of its electricity, but burning coal has worsened [air pollution](#), with record-high concentrations of [dangerous PM 2.5 particles](#) observed in several major cities earlier this year.

The World Health Organisation has warned that air pollution poses a major public health risk due to its links with a host of respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses.

Large areas of South Korea were [blanketed in fine dust](#) this spring, prompting MPs to warn that air pollution was creating a "social disaster".



In response, the government introduced a range of emergency measures, including limiting power plant and vehicle use, and cutting the amount of dust generated by building sites. But the measures have had little effect.

Non-essential vehicles will be banned from roads every other day in major cities for four months starting on Friday.

The [air pollution crisis](#) has caused friction with China, which South Korean public health experts say is responsible for between 50% and 70% of fine dust pollution in the Seoul area, home to almost half the country's population.

China rejected those claims and suggested that South Korea's own power plants, factories and vehicles were to blame.

South Korea's energy ministry said the coal plant suspensions would cut fine dust emissions by 44% over the three months from December compared to last year.

Demand this winter is expected to peak at around 88,600 megawatts (MW) in the fourth week of January, and to increase to 91,800 MW if there is an extreme cold snap, the energy ministry said.

Electricity supply is expected to meet demand with a power surplus of above 11,350 MW from December through February, it added.

*Scientific American*

# With Widespread Deforestation, North Korea Faces an Environmental Crisis

Depleted topsoil from lost trees makes farming difficult, exacerbating hunger in the hermit state

- By [Jean Chemnick](#), [E&E News](#) on April 19, 2019



Credit: [Jeff Schmaltz LANCE/EOSDIS MODIS Rapid Response Team at NASA GSFC](#)

North Korea holds a Tree Planting Day every March. The question is whether it helps regreen a largely denuded nation whose people face food shortages, deadly natural disasters and bitterly cold winters.

The public holiday began in 1946 when North Korea was under direct Soviet rule. Today, the state-sanctioned media still pays tribute to its claims of leafy success, sometimes with the participation of the “respected Supreme Leader.”

Even as new trees take root, subsistence logging and deforestation have an untold impact on the country's soil quality and its ability to feed its people.

"People cut down trees on a massive scale, both for fuel but also to clear room for farming," said Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, a Ph.D. candidate from the University of Pennsylvania who studies social control and surveillance in the North from Seoul, South Korea.

"You can see it when you're standing by the border with North Korea, whether it's in South Korea or in China," he continued. "The side you're on is just very lush. There are a lot of trees. But on the North Korean side, the hills are almost entirely bare."

North Korea's tree problem is one aspect of a bigger environmental crisis. The hermit state, known for its strident threats of nuclear war, is suffering from crippling drought and violent floods. Some experts suggest that those conditions, exacerbated by climate change, are pushing North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to the negotiating table to press President Trump for relief from economic sanctions ([Climatewire](#), April 11).

The government of North Korea acknowledges that forest cover shrank sharply during a famine in the 1990s, going from 8.3 million hectares to 7.6 million hectares in just a few years. And a 2014 study by researchers at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and Gyeonggi Research Institute drew on satellite data collected by South Korea's Environment Ministry to show that forests in the North are becoming more fragmented, with less contiguous tree cover.

That's bad for North Korea's wildlife, and it leads to depleted topsoil that's unable to do the work of feeding North Korea's population.

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The lack of ground cover means there are no roots to anchor soil in place and keep it from running off into rivers and streams during extreme weather events. And while North Korea has the task of growing its food rather than trading for it, its geography makes that complicated. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations says that just 17% of its territory is suitable for agriculture.

"The country is mountainous with steep hill slopes, which in many places are deforested," Bir Mandal, the FAO deputy representative in North Korea, wrote in an email to E&E News. "So, when a natural disaster occurs, it has the potential to cause much greater [disproportional] damage."

The past decade has brought a succession of floods, droughts, storms and other extreme weather to North Korea, damaging crops and killing livestock. That's resulted in landslides and land degradation, Mandal said. And also hunger. North Korea's food supply fell by 9% last year, according to estimates by FAO and the World Food Programme.